

Diane Davis, Reflections on Attending “Writing Strategies for Action”
Conference on College Composition and Communication
Houston, Texas April 6-9

“Writing Strategies for Action” was the theme of this year’s Conference on College Composition and Communication in Houston, Texas. Houston, the fourth most populous city in America, seemed as appropriate a choice for this venue as it was perplexing. This conference, one that champions inclusivity and non-discrimination, had to highlight the rich, diverse culture of the city at the same time it expressed disappointment with Houston’s November 2015 vote defeating the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance, or HERO (an ordinance that would have included protections from discrimination for many groups not protected now under city law). My birth state of Texas has always bewildered me—I have never understood how a state as diverse and massive in size could sustain such a distinct culture and voice. Yet, that said, clearly change is coming to Texas, and 4 C’s, with its focus on writing for action, is a reflection of that movement.

The conference started with a key note address from Dr. Joyce Locke Carter, an associate professor of Rhetoric and Technical Communications at Texas Tech University. She challenged all of us in attendance to be disrupters, to work for change, and to stop being so reactive and start an offensive that promotes what we do in the classroom. I’ll share here a few comments that inspired me:

On our present reaction to the attacks on education in this country,

“We sheepishly explain how important we are to the university and society, apologize while not apologizing even as we ask, like Oliver Twist, for some more because we know, we feel, that what we do is valuable—self-evidently valuable.”

She continues with this:

“Despite that belief, the value of what we do is not self-evident to anyone outside this room. That value is a proposition that has to be argued, not just once, but over and over, in many forms, from stories to empirical data, and in many settings, from governing bodies to the popular press.”

She then defined the term disruptive innovation as a concept that encourages us to make changes and challenge traditional practices/beliefs/assumptions that might ultimately be harmful.

She ends with this:

“We are those disruptors, those dreamers of dreams—or at least I argue we can be. I think we should make more disruption and less accommodation. We should focus more on making and makers and less on outcomes assessment and bureaucrats. We should celebrate writing innovation, and encourage innovation in writing, writing research, writing programs, and writing organizations.”

So, motivated by Dr. Carter’s words, I picked out sessions that championed rhetoric and a call to action. I was so fortunate to be there when my son Matthew Tougas, a proud JCCC graduate, presented in a Wed. workshop on “Composing Disruptions: Moving from Analysis to Action” (and those who know Matthew know he is very good at disrupting). Sessions I attended discussed rhetorical action in first

year composition classes such as “Teaching Writing as Rhetorical Action in Schools and Colleges”—an interesting session on avoiding the “make-believe” world we construct when we tell students to “imagine” a rhetorical situation and a hypothetical audience. It encouraged real world assignments with specific purpose and audience. Another session pushed back against the premise of texts like *Everything is an Argument* in a talk entitled “All That Glitters Rhetorical is Not Rhetoric.” This speaker suggested *Not Everything is an Argument, But Might Make a Claim* might be a more appropriate title, though as one of the editors of this highly successful text was in the room, I’m not sure the idea was well received. A session on “Hostile Writing: A Need to Explore These Forbidden Spaces” focused on first year military students and veterans and contrasted the types of writing these students may have experienced in the military (passing a piece of writing up the chain with the expectation there would be considerable criticism at all points and it needed to be “right”) and how to support these students when they are confronted with a writing assignment that can be interpreted in many ways. Another presentation entitled “Action, Reflection, Conscientization: Teaching Critical Thinking Skills in a Hostile Environment” discussed how the rise of Trump’s rhetoric exposed the previously coded language of political hate rhetoric and, with its focus on “circles of certainty”, makes critical analysis of his statements more difficult. This speaker argued in fact the position that “everyone’s views must be respected” is, in part, a reason Trump’s messages are harder for students to feel comfortable challenging.

By far the most interesting session I attended was one entitled “Martin, Ministers, and Music: Listening to African American Rhetorics in the Writing Classroom.” I had just finished sharing with my Comp II students King’s letter, and I expected these speakers might connect this reading to the larger theme of writing for action. Several of the speakers did indeed address King’s rhetorical power in this writing, and made the point the letter is one of the most anthologized of all writings in composition classrooms. One of the most unique was a speaker who compared King’s specific address to the eight moderate white clergy of Birmingham and the more general audience of everyone else to the To: CC: BC: lines in an email address. She teaches her students to note the change in meaning (and often power) when different audiences are included in a specific email address.

These presentations were interesting, and what I expected. What I didn’t expect was the presentation by Brittney Boykins from Tallahassee Community College speaking to King’s rhetorical power as a preacher. She spoke on “Black Church Literacy Practices Working in the Composition Classroom.” Boykins shared her experience introducing composition students to the “call and response” rhetorical practices of a black minister in a black church who will preach knowing his/her words will be met with verbal affirmations throughout—or, perhaps, even verbal disagreements. The immediacy of that feedback, the idea that the written text is alive because an audience is hearing it and responding to it line by line real time, is something I had never considered using in a classroom. She used a term “white practice” (silently listening until the very end of a reading) to describe how most of her students approached peer review. Each would read a draft, and when finished, and only when finished, the other students might comment. She wanted to see if her students might find the oral presentation of a draft, and the immediate feedback of verbal agreement or disagreement point by point, more helpful. She admitted her students were uncomfortable at first with this, and she had to invite other professors in the classroom to help her model the behavior, but in time, found it to be very useful for her students.

I’ve been thinking since this conference about “call and response” and how important I think it is for us to not only respond often and specifically to what our students say/write, but also to “call and respond”

to our colleagues. I fear sometimes in this culture of insecurity about our jobs, our professions, and education in general, our instinct is to go inward, be silent, and not call or respond.

If indeed writing to promote action is what our discipline needs now more than ever, many will need to write, and many more respond. It is in that give and take, that conversation, verbally or in writing, that action is encouraged and supported. As a theme for a group of composition and rhetoric teachers it worked well for 4 C's, and I'd like to encourage us to consider writing for action as a focus for our division and our college in these difficult times.